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AUTHOR Dale, Sharon; Dale, J. Alexander
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ABSTRACT

Fiestaware, the brightly colored dinnerware first introduced in the United States in 1936, has been a cultural phenomenon from its inception. This paper seeks to explain the extraordinary popularity of Fiestaware and to understand the role the ware occupies in U.S. popular culture. Fiestaware achieved enormous success, in spite of its introduction during the Depression, because it was shrewdly marketed at the lower- and middle-class segments of society, and was made available everywhere, mostly in five-and-dime stores. The design was clean and bold, in startlingly bright colors, and mostly, inexpensive. Even though Fiestaware remains very popular today, a collector's item, in fact, its success can be explained in terms of its widespread availability. Familiar to generations of North Americans Fiestaware became a "collectable" that would never be out of financial reach for the collector of modest means. (DB)

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Fiestaware as An Icon in the Popular Culture of America

by

Sharon Dale, Penn State - Erie, The Behrend College[1]

and J. Alexander Dale, Allegheny College

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[1]Please address correspondence to the first author at:

Sharon Dale
Division of Humanities & Social Sciences
Behrend College
Station Road
Erie, PA 16563

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Mention Fiestaware (see Dale, 1986) to virtually any North American, and, more likely than not, your listener will recollect eating many meals on the brightly colored wares. Most will favorably and wistfully recall those good old days. Many others will visibly pale at the recollection of what certain foods looked like when served upon these dishes. Still others will confess that they stockpile collections of these wares, often not using them but exhibiting them. What makes Fiestaware so ubiquitously known? How can we explain the phenomenal popularity of these dishes since their introduction in 1936?

Fiestaware was designed by Frederick Hurten Rhead, a British potter who had emigrated to the United States in 1902 and worked for many years at a variety of art pottery houses. In 1927, Rhead accepted a position at the Homer Laughlin China Company. Homer Laughlin was among the largest producers of whiteware in America, and even before Fiestaware, had enjoyed much success marketing mid- to low-priced dinnerware.

Let's dispel with a few myths. Fiesta was not the first brightly colored dinnerware in the U.S. At least four factories in California were producing such dishes several years before Homer Laughlin. Second, even the mix-and-match idea, strongly promoted by Homer Laughlin, was also used earlier elsewhere. What made Fiesta such a success was neither concept nor execution, but

marketing. Lest there be doubters among you on the efficacy of marketing, think only of two sweet geezers hawking marginally potable wine mixed with sugar and fruit pulp for Bartles and Jaymes, also known as the Gallo Wine Company.

As Rhead described the design and marketing process of Fiesta, we learn that market research took the lead. By 1927, Rhead had already written about the need to target design to the tastes of specific market segments, a truism of marketing today, but virtually unknown in 1927.

Rhead divided the American public into five categories:

1. Foreign population, having a primitive taste for color and decoration, that constituted 30% of the population.

2. The American working class, public school education, little knowledge of art and unconsciously accepting latest commercial offerings (40%)

3. High school and university public, average trade and professional classes, some superficial acquaintance with decorative style and a decided preference for a foreign product in contradiction to their sincere conviction that the United States is the greatest country in the world (20%)

4. College and cultural classes who are more or less familiar with the better types of commercial and art products, and who exercise what is currently accepted as being in good taste (5%)

5. Wealthy classes exercising a selection ranging from lavish and over-crowded decoration to the more conservative but equally expensive special products (5%; Rhead, 1927)

Fiesta was targeted at the largest possible market, that is, roughly his first three categories--foreignclasses, working class and high school and university public, or approximately 90% of the population.

Rhead (1927) indicated an awareness that the public at large was not tuned into extreme design. He wrote, "We did not think in terms of art. We attempted to analyze that cross section of the public we aimed to interest and then set to work to develop a type which would satisfy that appeal within the estimated purchasing power of that group" (p. 392.)

The purchasing power of the target group was not large, given the economic facts of the Depression. As a matter of fact, Fiesta was made to be

sold cheaply and widely at such stores as Woolworth's. The five and dime routinely has not been the source of industrial design revolution in the United States, and herein lay the true impact of Fiesta on American popular culture.

The design was good, clean, bold and, mostly, inexpensive. It might have appealed to the Chivas Regal crowd, but it was designed and marketed for "Josephine Sixpack". The line was sold everywhere, but mostly in low-end stores like five and dimes. The whopping success of the line went against most prevailing notions of cultural diffusion. Instead of a trickle-down effect in which the poor seek to emulate the tastes of the wealthy, the masses appropriated the cultural vanguard.

The bright, glitzy colors of the ware and the upbeat name, with its foreign, exotic associations, were deliberate and successful antidotes to the drab reality of Depression life, much like a Busby Berkley movie. If you couldn't be a dream girl of 1936, you could at least eat on her plates. The unabashedly kitschy promotion posters inevitably featured torrid (for 1936) flamenco-dancing couples painted in the colors of the dinnerware.

The tones of the original Fiesta colors, cobalt blue, orange-red, cucumber green, lemon yellow and ivory (see Dale 1986, p.79) were chosen carefully to

insure that they worked well together and with other dinnerware that one might have around the house. A Fiesta service for eight sold as a set consisted of 8 apiece of 10", 8" and 6" plates with a chop plate, compote, 2 candlesticks, salt and pepper and sugar and creamer sold for 23.50. Tea cups and saucers as well as numerous additional serving pieces and even Tom and Jerry mugs could be added to the basic set. Of course, individual pieces could be had for less than a dollar a plate.

In 1939 after the initial success of Fiesta, Woolworth's commissioned an "exclusive" variant on the line, Harlequin, that was more angular in shape and generally thinner. This was followed by Riviera in which an older Rhead design called Century, characterized by squarish plates was glazed in the saturated palate of Fiesta. Other tones of the original Fiesta colors were added to these lines including a turquoise blue and an avocado green. Older lines produced by Homer Laughlin, some with decals affixed to them, were produced in the newer, saturated glazes. New accessories were constantly being added to the lines as well.

Fiesta continued to sell well into the 1940's and fifties, slowing in the 60's. During the 1960's, attrition in the colors and shapes available culminated in 1972, when the last pieces of Fiesta were made- the last to go was everyone's favorite

uranium oxide red- a color that was discontinued in 1943 to free up the uranium for making atomic bombs and not re-introduced again until 1959.

But even before production ceased, collectors were already scouring flea markets and junk shops for "original" Fiesta and even for the less desirable Harlequin and Riviera. Currently, a ten inch Fiesta dinner plate sells for 15.00 in the resale market. Rare accessory pieces command many more dollars. Why pay dearly for what was once so cheap? Good design? Perhaps, but far better modern industrial design has been available. Nostalgia for the Depression? Doubtful--although nostalgia is certainly a distinctly American substitute for the history we choose to ignore.

We propose that the popularity of Fiesta today is at least partially attributable to a phenomenon called "the mere exposure effect" as defined by Robert Zajonc (1968). Simply, the more familiar an object, the more favorably disposed one is to it, or, familiarity breeds not contempt, but, affection. And, what was more familiar to generations of Americans and Canadians than Fiesta? The widespread availability of Fiesta made it a "Collectable" that would never be out of financial reach for the collector of modest means. Thus, even as a collectable, Fiesta retains its mass appeal.

And Mass it is. Fiesta collectors abound secure in the knowledge that they are a select breed. Just as collectors of Renaissance paintings or Etruscan coins, collectors of Fiesta must have "elitist" expertise, not known to outsiders. So for instance, one might engage in spirited discussion with other collectors about the introductory date of a particular color or form. One is permitted to smirk at a rival's chipped relish dish or bask confidently in the knowledge that your Fiesta is so early it is marked simply Fiesta , not the louder "Genuine" Fiesta appellation added to dishes made after 1939.

If the story ended here, we might simply conclude that Fiesta had moved from the ordinary to the cherished in a predictable and consistent fashion, from mass dinnerware to mass collectable.

Alas this could not be, though because in 1986, with much fanfare, Homer Laughlin introduced a new Genuine Fiesta" line in some new colors. Retaining the original cobalt blue, a popular color in dinnerware, particularly with the Big Chill generation, the company added yuppie apricot and rose colors along with black and white. A significant feature of the colors chosen was that they work well with the older Fiesta colors.

The line was introduced at an opening at the West Virginia State Museum where an historical exhibition of Homer Laughlin china was installed. Governor Arch Moore of West Virginia attended, and while the president couldn't make it, the china buyer from Bloomingdale's was flown in on a West Virginia state jet. No one from Woolworth's was invited. Indeed the company marketing literature advises, "The line will be sold at Bloomingdale's, B. Altman's, Kaufmann's and other fine department stores nationwide." Additionally, the Vermont Country store, a downhome sort of place with a national mail order catalogue that sells folksy at a price, is also featuring it. A place setting there will is $17.50, while the slick and trendy Bloomingdale's charges $15.00 a setting. Folksy may be cheap, but it is not inexpensive.

Homer Laughlin has reported that sales are brisk, although since it is a privately owned company, no sales figures are publicly available. Should this popularity surprise us? Dollar for dollar, $15.00 is not bad for a five-piece place setting. The ponderous weight of the pieces and their Art Deco lines are simultaneously comforting and trendy and frankly, still powerfully sculptural. There is a kind of in-joke or in-crowd identity that one purchases with these dishes. Guests invariably comment on the owner's appreciation of a shared material culture. --after all, almost everyone remembers the ceramics from the first production. But, The exclusivity of the marketing guarantees that, like the right

shopping bag, these dishes attest to the classiness of the consumer.

In the plus ça change plus ça la même chose department, we should note that in 1941 Rhead complained bitterly about Japanese imitations of Fiesta and other lines that were flooding the American market. He wrote, "We should continue to put up an efficient and relentless fight against unfair foreign competition and the importation of wares of obviously inferior quality" (Rhead, 1927, p 39). Rhead published comparative photographs to assist purchasers in identifying the cheap imitations.

Tempus fugit 1986, coincident with the introduction of new genuine Fiesta, a line called Images appeared in store showrooms where a five piece place setting, service for eight is selling for 39.97, discounted from 49.95. The resemblance to new genuine Fiesta is clear. In another marketing tour de farce, the manufacturer's name on the plates is Nancy Calhoun. Despite her Tennessee-sounding name, these dishes are boldly stamped "Japan" right under the stamps that tell you that the light grey plate you are holding is called light grey.

Once again, marketing will determine the success of the new- and real-Fiesta. What was mass culture at the bottom is now mass culture of the middle that aspires to be the top. Yet, the curious paradox is that the original Fiesta was

a bold, innovative statement of advanced industrial design, liberated from vestigial historicism. For all the exotica that the Fiesta name connoted, the design was purely American, destined for a mass culture. Despite the yuppie colors, the new Fiesta is a retardataire symbol of vestigial historicism, an exercise in nostalgia destined for sophisticates with their roots in the past, a post- modernist foray in industrial design.

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